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### Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avant-Garde*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018

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## REFERENCES

Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 226 p.

- 1 Who'd have thought that a book on the apparently recondite subject of opera in Venice in the ten years between 1951-1961 could yield such richness of political and cultural analysis of post-war Italy as does this widely researched, and compellingly written and argued, study? Harriet Boyd-Bennett takes six key performances presented at La Fenice opera house in Venice during these years (the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* in 1951; the first modern revival of Verdi's early Risorgimento opera *Attila*, also 1951; the premiere of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* in 1954; the very belated theatrical premiere of Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* in 1955; a trio of experimental works by contemporary Italian composers in 1959; and finally, Luigi Nono's overtly agit-prop drama *Intolleranza 1960* in 1961) to spin a rich historical web in which Venice and opera serve metonymically as optics for understanding the complex adjustments that postwar Italy had to make in addressing its recent fascist past and the depredations of war. The reason for the aptness of both city and artform for this exercise are, as the book jacket blurb explains, that "Both opera and Venice in the middle of the century are often talked about in strikingly similar terms: as museums locked in the past and blind to the future" ("sepulchral revenants" is the even more delightfully spooky term used by Boyd-Bennett herself). And yet both opera and Venice were also focal points for debates about Italy's political and cultural future in a recently redrawn world.

- 2 The book is, more than anything, an extended example of the methods of reception history, finding more value in reflecting upon the ways in which cultural works are promoted and received than in their creators' supposed intentions. The book draws in particular upon the often heated critical debates of the period, in the mainstream press as well as in musical and cultural journals, around the meanings and value of each of the works performed in Venice. If nothing else, the book gives a sense of the political and intellectual commitment (*impegno* – a word that comes up a number of times in the book) of Italian music criticism; the sense that something was at stake in the cultural choices of the period that puts the essential dilettantism of most British music criticism, then and today, in sharp relief. Like food, culture matters in Italy, where it is deeply imbricated in politics (sometimes to its detriment, it has to be said).
- 3 Setting the context for the discussion of each of the individual works, the introduction to the book maps out some of the key issues that preoccupied Italian culture in the postwar period. Most oppressive and divisive, of course, was how to deal with the legacy of fascism, a task that was rendered all the more difficult since, unlike in Nazi Germany, Italian fascism was slippery, adept at embracing apparently contradictory agendas. In arts this could result in an endorsement of modernism (drawing on the proto-fascist legacy of Futurism in particular), of classicism, and a more reactionary traditionalism that led, in music, to a historical revival of past Italian music designed to affirm its superiority and continuity, often backed up by serious scholarship. The career of the Venetian-born composer Gian-Francesco Malipiero was typical of this dichotomy. A convert to modernism after experiencing *The Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913, Malipiero was initially taken up by D'Annunzio and Mussolini, but then fell out of favour with the regime, turning his hand to producing a ground-breaking scholarly edition of the works of Monteverdi, the composer whom D'Annunzio himself had claimed, in his typically inflated rhetoric, as the founder of modern music: "We must glorify the greatest of innovators: the divine Claudio Monteverde [sic]... what a heroic soul, purely Italian in its essence!"<sup>1</sup>
- 4 Boyd-Bennett places these debates about postwar Italian culture within both a "transnational" context (three of the operas she discusses are, after all, not Italian), reminding us that issues concerning the validity of avant-garde art against either committed art or popular culture reached far beyond Italy. But she also considers the specificity, and more particularly the regionalism, of Italian political cultures. Aspects of Italian culture that are highlighted as distinctive include what was dubbed by the oxymoron *cattocommunismo* – a unique alignment of catholicism and communism with which the influential musicologist and critic Fedele D'Amico (for one) was associated. (Older readers will remember how this unlikely conjunction played out in Giovanni Guareschi's delightful *Don Camillo* stories, in which the permanent struggle between catholic priest and communist mayor in a small northern Italian town reveals surprising underlying affinities).
- 5 The first work up for detailed scrutiny is Stravinsky's late opera *The Rake's Progress* – capturing the premiere of which was something of a trophy for the Venetian opera house. The opera encapsulates all of the debates about the direction of postwar Italian culture, offering the dilemma of whether Stravinsky should be seen as a modernist or a reactionary: whether his neo-classical pastiche should be seen as a museum piece, indicative of a city that was itself "embalmed in its architectural forms" (as one critic put it), or as form of modernist collage, a reminder that Venice itself, with its famed

Biennale of contemporary arts and its industrial periphery, offered extreme juxtapositions of a similar kind.

- 6 Next up is the revival of an early Verdi opera *Attila*, first performed in Venice as 1846, as part of a series of events to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the composer. The metaphors in this chapter – of “sepulchral commemorations” and “Venetian exhumation” – become darker as the legacy of Verdi (and perhaps opera itself, if we recall Gramsci’s argument that Italian politics had been contaminated by the rhetoric of operatic melodrama, a theme of both Visconti’s film *Senso* of 1954 and Bertolucci’s *Spider’s Stratagem* of 1970), and Verdi’s position within the historiography of the Risorgimento, is contested. Once lauded as a specifically Italian hero, Verdi’s “universality” was now the preferred critical trope.
- 7 Three years later Venice becomes the location for the premiere of Benjamin Britten’s chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw*, based on Henry James’s creepy novella of the same name (cue for more metaphors of ghosts, revenants, the undead). Despite the reluctant acknowledgement by Italian critics that Britten might be the best hope for modern opera, “the only young composer alive today who is able to make us believe that opera is not dead”, the work was oddly, and somewhat patronisingly, received as an operatic example of the low-brow genre of thriller fiction dubbed in Italian as *giallo* (yellow) from the colour of the cheap paperback covers, and became the focus of fierce debates about the wider validity of popular culture. Yet Italian critics also found Britten’s music to be too cerebral and calculated (perhaps playing out old stereotypes of the British as reserved and chilly), and suggested that the opera’s morbid theme was typical of Anglo-Saxon “puritanical repression”. Italianicity (to use Roland Barthes’ handy term) was now being defined in relation to other cultures.
- 8 Written between 1919 and 1927, Prokofiev’s mystical-symbolist opera *The Fiery Angel* had never been staged, and the score was only rediscovered in Paris in 1945. Perhaps Prokofiev’s most extreme score, presenting many dramaturgical challenges, Boyd-Bennett suggests that the opera was viewed by Italian critics through the lens of the emerging literary genre of magical realism, its vivid sonic effects being seen as kind of sensory realism, and its esoteric mysticism as chiming with a renewed historical and anthropological interest in traditions of magic and esotericism in Italian culture, intended to better understand the causes of irrationalism in modern, technocratic societies.
- 9 The book’s two final case studies finally reach contemporary Italian opera: a trio of experimental works by Luciano Berio, Bruni Tedeschi and Gino Negri that, in different ways, drew on current interest in what the Umberto Eco was subsequently to describe as the *opera aperta* (the “open work”) – the work that does not dictate its meanings – and Luigi Nono’s “protest” opera *Intolleranza 1960* (which certainly does dictate its meaning). Oddly, given that they engage finally with works produced by modern Italians, these two chapters are perhaps the least rewarding. Replaying many of the previous debates (e.g. avant-garde art vs popular culture), and with greater emphasis upon aesthetic and dramaturgical issues, the chapters lead to some unconvincing critical outcomes. The chapter on the trio of open works judges, somewhat evasively, that they offer “a timeliness and contemporaneity veiled in notions of openness and ambiguity”, and the chapter recuperates the pervasive notion of “crisis” to offer an equally veiled conclusion: “Timeliness for a time of crisis”. “Crisis” is here used as something of a catchall category to sharpen the stakes of any historical moment.

Similar tropes are re-enacted in the discussion of Nono's rejection of the abstract a-historicism, the postwar *tabula rasa*, of the Darmstadt ideology, and his desire for a music of historical and political engagement. Drawing on the traditions of the epic theatre of Piscator and Brecht, and incorporating new media in a way intended to challenge the hegemony of popular entertainment media (the scenography was by the great Czech multimedia stage designer Josef Svoboda), the work raised many questions about the possibility of a modernist musical language suitable for the democratic struggle.

- 10 Nono's opera now sounds intolerably dated in both its crude political posturing, its inflated allegorizing, and its strident, and ultimately generic, musical modernism. Critics were surely clutching at straws when they interpreted its relentless wall-of-sound as a representation of violence and oppression (yes indeed, but...). The book ends somewhat abruptly on the impasse represented by Nono's opera, leaving us uncertain as to what was to follow. Some sort of postscript might have been helpful here – after all, Nono's own trajectory took a new turn when in 1965 he met a group of young Venetian leftist intellectuals that included the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri and the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, later mayor of Venice. The group formed a distinctively Venetian form of political and cultural *impegno*, based on Cacciari's negative dialectics, that led to Nono's masterpiece (with Cacciari), the "tragedy for listening" *Prometeo*, a work that could perhaps be said to have transcended (in Hegelian terms) the cultural aporias of the immediate postwar period.
- 11 Nonetheless, this is a rich and rewarding book; an exemplary example of a contextualising cultural history that finds reverberations in works of art way beyond their immediate content.

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## NOTES

1. D'ANNUNZIO Gabriele, *Il fuoco* (1900), quoted in DELL'ANTONIO Andrew, "Il divino Claudio: Monteverdi and Lyric Nostalgia in Fascist Italy", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 8, n° 3, 1996, p 275.

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## AUTHOR

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Nicholas Till is a historian, theorist and creative practitioner working in opera and music theatre. He is the author of *Mozart and the Enlightenment; Truth, Virtue and Beauty in Mozart's Operas* (Faber & Faber 1992), and is editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies* (Cambridge University

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